

THE LURE OF PLACE NAMES

For reasons of social history, the number of places on planet Earth with Scottish names is out of all proportion to the population and land area of the little country in which I live. How places on distant continents obtained their names is a matter of endless fascination to me, one that could lead to an almost unending series of Parting Shots, a temptation I will avoid. But sometimes I visit the New World and find that the contrast between what I see there and what I know back home is so marked that I'm driven to peer into Google and ferret out the connection.

Take, for example, the magnificent, wealthy Canadian city of Calgary. There it stands, at the foot of the Kicking Horse Pass, which takes the Canadian Pacific and the Trans-Canada Highway west through the Rocky Mountains, facing out to the east over the immense plains of central Canada and the USA. With a population of more than a million and great riches based on oil and gas, it is a riot of skyscrapers and mirror glass.

I know the original Calgary. It is a cluster of a few houses at the head of Calgary Bay on the northwest coast of the island of Mull off the west coast of Highland Scotland. It is simply achingly beautiful. Near-silent apart from the seabirds, the turquoise sea laps gently onto a snow-white beach of shell sand, fringed by grass-covered dunes nibbled to a perfect green carpet by sheep – a terrain known as *machair* in Gaelic. The name 'Calgary' probably comes from the Gaelic *cala gherraidh* (which is pronounced 'calgary', more-or-less) and means 'the beach of the pasture'. (As usual in such matters this is disputed by some, who favour a Norse origin.) The distant headland has basalt trap topography, because most of Mull is a lava pile extruded at about 60 Ma, when the North Atlantic began to open. The lava was erupted from fissures and from a central volcano whose inner structures are exposed some 20 km to the south. The concept of two worldwide basaltic magma types, which dominated much petrological thinking from the 1930s, grew out of E. B. Bailey's mapping of the Mull volcano. The Calgary lavas are of the classic 'plateau magma type', olivine and alkali olivine basalts, while those from the central volcano, the 'non-porphyrific central type', are predominantly tholeiitic.

So how did this exquisite, lonely bay come to give its name to a shining metropolis in Alberta? The romantic ideal is that some family of dispossessed crofters found its way across the vast spaces of Canada, and at this location decided to put down its roots. In a rush of homesickness, they named their new homestead Calgary. The real story is rather different.



Calgary, Isle of Mull



Calgary, Alberta, Canada

The only large building near Calgary Bay is a vast, turreted and castellated, pseudo-gothic mansion built in 1817 by a Captain MacAskill and now called 'Calgary Castle'. At that time the bay could be reached only by sea, and you do wonder whom he was trying to impress! In 1876, the Commissioner of the Northwest Mounted Police (which later became the Royal Canadian Mounted Police), James Macleod, stayed in the house. The NWMP had been set up in 1873 by Queen Victoria to

bring law and order to, and assert sovereignty over, the Northwest Territories, and they established Fort Brisebois where Calgary Mark 2 now stands. Macleod liked Calgary Bay. Can I imagine him striding the *machair* in his red tunic and boy-scout hat? When he returned to Canada he renamed his new fort 'Fort Calgary'. So, it was the Mounties who brought Calgary to Calgary!

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